

Media Discourse and the Shroud of Turin

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In a “trucker chapel” in Raleigh, North Carolina, political commentator and comedian Bill Maher speaks with a small group of Christians about their faith in the Bible. Maher asks, “Are you ever bothered by many things that are in Christianity that are not in the Bible, like original sin, immaculate conception, the virgin birth is only in two of the Gospels, Popes...Are you worried that these things came not from the founders, the people that wrote this book, but from—and this is indisputable—but from men? From human beings, who came after them? And when I say men, I mean people with penises.” A man interrupts Maher, answering, “If you want to go back to scientific proof, I think it was the ‘Turban of Shroud,’ or whatever that was going on around awhile back, I didn’t get involved with it, they took blood samples from it, and it was a female blood with a male figure. Ok, the only possible way that could happen was that the Holy Ghost impregnated Mary, because it would have been female blood, because it would have been the only blood flowing through her.” Maher looks at the man perplexed, as though he doesn’t know quite what to make of what was said, until the minister of the chapel steers the conversation in another direction.¹

What can be said about this small moment in a made-for-box-office documentary on the perils and absurdity of religious belief? Does it matter that this unnamed man was actually wrong in his attempt to describe the Shroud of Turin? Or is the fact that he used whatever information

¹ Larry Charles, Director, *Religulous*, 2008.

he had received about the Shroud to strengthen and justify his faith more important to the discussion and understanding of religious belief? We all operate in a society that is formed and informed by discourse, one in which our beliefs and ideas are shaped by those things that we are exposed to, and we alter our preexisting beliefs accordingly. This small moment in the film *Religulous* is a perfect reason for closely examining Shroud discourse, as we are aware that people are exposed to the Shroud by different media representations with varying, and quite often, competing agendas.

The Shroud of Turin is a Christian relic owned and maintained by the Catholic Church, housed in a cathedral in Turin, Italy.² The Shroud is thought by some to be the actual burial cloth of Jesus Christ, bearing the faint image of a crucified man, created by miraculous means. On the other hand, skeptics contend that the Shroud is either a deliberate hoax to fool the faithful, or a forgery done in an effort to bolster belief. For the purposes of this analysis on the discourse surrounding the Shroud of Turin, the Shroud's authenticity will be disregarded. More than enough has been written and produced about whether the Shroud is "real" or "fake," and it is not my intention to provide a definitive answer. Also, my personal opinion on the Shroud is of no consequence to this discussion as I seek to understand the ways in which the Shroud is presented by believers and skeptics, the work that is done in these presentations, and how this work may affect personal belief.

What should and will be discussed instead is how the dissemination of information on the Shroud, and opinions formed about it, have corresponded to technological advances in media, as well as the way in which the discourse surrounding the Shroud acts as *the* medium for belief in this holy relic. To do this, I will be employing the theories of both Jeffrey Sconce in Haunted

² Joe Nickell, *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1983), 8.

Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television, and Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message*.

While the Shroud was known to the most ardent believers and those with strong ties to the Catholic Church up until the late 19th century, it did not gain great notoriety until 1898, when the first photograph of it was taken.³ Seconda Pia, an amateur photographer, was granted permission by the Church to use the new technology of photography to capture an image of the Shroud on a glass plate. While developing the image, Pia noticed something remarkable for the first time. Mark Antonacci, attorney and self-proclaimed “expert” on the Shroud,⁴ writes that “when Pia developed his film, he became so startled by what he saw that his trembling nearly caused him to drop the heavy photographic plate. He was the first to witness the ‘negativity’ of the body image.”⁵

When photographs are developed on film (or in Pia’s case a glass plate), the image is preserved as a “negative,” an image in which the lights and colors of the photograph are reversed. Light shades become darker, dark shades become lighter, and colors “flip” to their opposite and complementary color (reds to greens, blues to oranges, and so forth.) Often, precise details are only seen in the “positive” image—what we see as the actual image itself, or as the item or event being photographed. Subtle differences can and will show up in the image’s “positive” that cannot be seen in the “negative.” This is the phenomenon that Pia first observed while developing his image of the Shroud. Chris Cunningham, writing in Michael Shermer’s Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience, explains that when Pia “developed the negative, he discovered that, instead of the usual oddly shaded inverted image [which would have been present in a

³ Mark Antonacci, *The Resurrection of the Shroud*, (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 2000), 34.

⁴ See Antonacci’s website for information on his “Resurrection of the Shroud Foundation,” in which he serves as President and Founder. www.resurrectionoftheshroud.com.

⁵ Ibid.

‘normal’ photograph’s negative], it showed a very lifelike image of a man. The only way this could have occurred, he believed, was if the image on the Shroud was, in fact, a negative itself.”⁶ Due to light and color variations on the Shroud, the negative of the photograph that Pia developed was understood to be the Shroud’s “positive” image. That is, because the image on the Shroud is so difficult to ascertain on its own, and because the “negative” of the image that Pia took provided additional details and clarity in understanding the man depicted on the Shroud, the Shroud itself was believed to be a photographic negative.

What could be understood as a normal process of film development has been used by believers to point to the Shroud’s hidden mysteries and esoteric meanings. Again, Antonacci writes that “this stunning revelation provided the earliest clue that a great deal of information invisible to the human eye was somehow encoded within the cloth. It would be another eighty years before scientists began to realize just how much hidden evidence the Shroud actually holds.”⁷ In Marshall McLuhan’s terms, this mediated image of the Shroud *is* the Shroud’s actual message.⁸ However, it is fair to say that this new understanding of the Shroud would not have been possible without the technology of photography.

Jeffrey Sconce argues in Haunted Media that without the advent of new technologies, such as the telegraph and television, certain ways of believing and understanding the supernatural would not have been possible.⁹ While this claim is certainly debatable to some, it is obvious in this case that without Pia’s photograph the ability to understand the Shroud as holding ineffable information would not have been conceivable. Antonacci again writes, “although most photo negatives appear ghostlike and unnatural, the Shroud photo negative discloses an image of

⁶ Chris Cunningham, *The Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience*, ed. Michael Shermer (California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2002), 214.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, (California: Gingko Press, Inc., 1967).

⁹ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000).

realistic clarity, as with a photo positive.”¹⁰ Particular belief about the Shroud has now evolved with the advent of photography. The Shroud on its own *apart from photographic technology* holds knowledge and mystery that could only have been created by a miracle, and only understood with reference to the photograph.

For the believer, this is proof of God’s work and the Shroud’s authenticity as a valid holy relic. It is understood and argued that there would be no possible way an artist could have achieved such an effect without having the necessary technology to produce and alter his work. To add to that, there could also be no rational way to understand this phenomenon as occurring by accident, as to show the minute details associated with the crucifixion of Christ.¹¹ However, for the skeptic, this “phenomenon” was and is nothing more than a natural occurrence due to the way the Shroud was intentionally produced and then photographed. Notable skeptic Joe Nickell writes that “the analogy with photography is misleading: the ‘positive’ image shows a figure with white hair and beard, the opposite of what would be expected of a Palestinian Jew in his thirties. Nevertheless, some Shroud advocates suggested that the image was produced by simple contact with bloody sweat or burial ointments. The prominences would therefore be imprinted, while the recesses would remain blank, thus producing quasi-negative images.”¹² This understanding of the “negative” image of the Shroud leads Nickell to assert that “the figure is obviously either Jesus or an artist’s representation of him,” as opposed to a miraculous image.¹³

While the advent of photography brought more attention to the Shroud than ever before, it could be argued that the real catalyst for the dissemination of information on the Shroud, and even the Shroud itself, was the documentary film. No longer did one have to rely on a

¹⁰ Antonacci, 35.

¹¹ Ibid, 36.

¹² Joe Nickell, *The Jesus Relics: From the Holy Grail to the Turin Shroud*, (Great Britain: The History Press, Ltd., 2007), 182.

¹³ Ibid.

photograph or the written word to tell the mysterious story of the Shroud; image, text, and spoken word could be joined together to create a cohesive narrative, allowing viewers the opportunity to interact with and “investigate” the Shroud like never before.

Marshall McLuhan is known for his argument that the way a message is presented affects its receiving and understanding more than the message itself.¹⁴ He writes that “societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.”¹⁵ In this vein, the way that the Shroud has been presented by various documentaries affects the way a viewer understands and relates to the Shroud even more than the presented information. The style of the documentaries, even more than the message of the Shroud itself, “works us over,” and allows for the ability to make decisions about the Shroud based on the mediated message.¹⁶

These types of educational and made-for-television documentaries are created for the home viewer, quite often with an intentional agenda or overarching bias. The way the viewer interacts with them amplifies McLuhan’s point that “the living room has become a voting booth.”¹⁷ The home viewer, by watching a documentary on the Shroud, is now able to decide for himself what to believe and how to think about the Shroud by coming into contact with it in a way they may never have been able to before. By altering the style in which the Shroud is presented through these documentaries, belief and information about the relic is manipulated in a way that directly coincides with the style and method of the presentation.

One documentary is the History Channels’ The Real Face of Jesus, released in 2010. The film is the backdrop for computer graphic artist Ray Downing’s attempt to create a 3D image of

¹⁴ McLuhan, general.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 26.

¹⁷ Ibid, 22.

the represented man on the Shroud of Turin. Prior to this film, Downing was the head artist of a team who used 130 photographs and 2 life casts to create the 3D image of Abraham Lincoln in an earlier documentary for the History Channel, Stealing Lincoln's Body.¹⁸ As expected from a film dealing with 3D imagery and computer animation, The Real Face of Jesus is sleek and modern, presenting its information much like a current episode of *CSI*, with crime-scene investigations, laser-like light work, and plenty of experts to give their opinions on blood samples, the Shroud's weave pattern, art history, and so forth.

As opposed to other documentaries regularly aired on "educational" cable networks, The Real Face of Jesus presents the Shroud as fact, rather than as a question to be answered. While there is a lengthy discussion on the authenticity of the Shroud, the overarching theme is that the Shroud is real, and from it we can determine what Jesus would have looked like by utilizing the image on the cloth. The documentary employs various methods and techniques to get their point across, and to prove to the viewer that the Shroud is exactly what they say it is—the burial shroud of Jesus Christ.

First, and possibly most importantly, The Real Face of Jesus was produced by and aired on the History Channel. While an argument could—and probably should—be made whether the History channel has or deserves any note of credibility, the fact remains that to the majority of its viewing audience, it is a legitimate source of information. By producing such a program on the Shroud of Turin, the History Channel gives tacit reliability that what is presented in the documentary is unquestionable truth. Without any prior knowledge of the Shroud as such a contentious relic or an understanding of how media and mediated presentations have the ability to manipulate conceptions, one could easily come away from watching this program with the belief that the Shroud is authentic.

¹⁸ Ray Downing, *Ray Downing*, www.raydowning.com.

Second, while the debate between science and religion rages on, believers often attempt to use scientific facts and discoveries to make their case that science has “proved” religion. Harry E. Gove, one of the co-inventors of accelerator mass spectrometry—a method used in carbon dating—wrote in his chronicle of events surrounding the Shroud’s carbon dating process that “the relationship between religion and science has always been somewhat uneasy, at times hostile, and one frequently marked by misunderstanding—both minor and major.”¹⁹ However, the Shroud, as presented in The Real Face of Jesus, is no longer up for debate. Science has proven its “shocking secret,” and the researchers in the documentary are quick to use scientific methods and “style” to drive this point home.²⁰ Even when they fail, as they do in their ironic refutation of the Shroud’s carbon dating to the 13th-14th centuries, the air of scientific credibility lingers.²¹

Third, with the exception of one author, all of the people profiled in the documentary are either believers in the Shroud with ties to STURP (the Shroud of Turin Research Project,) or part of Downing’s CGI team. Without the inclusion of a dissenting voice in the film, it is fair to say that all information presented about the Shroud during the documentary by authors, scientists and historians are on the side of authenticity. The only commentator during the film who may be considered skeptical is Rag and Bone author, Peter Manseau, due to his questioning of religious belief and faith in his news-blog, “Killing the Buddha.”²² However, even his comments and insights on the Shroud are mediated in the most Shroud-positive way, as he gives no real evidence or voice to the possibility of the Shroud as being inauthentic.

¹⁹ Harry E Gove, *Relic, Icon or Hoax? Carbon Dating the Shroud of Turin* (London: University of Rochester, 1996), ix.

²⁰ The History Channel, *The Real Face of Jesus*. 2010.

²¹²¹ Joe Nickell, *Looking for a Miracle* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993).

²² Peter Manseau, “Killing the Buddha.” www.killingthebuddha.com.

Finally, the timing of this particular documentary should be noted, and how it reinforces the holy Christian holiday of Easter, while appealing to pre-existing beliefs about the sacred events of Jesus's death and resurrection for viewers as they make their judgments on the Shroud. While discussing the Shroud, we must remember the events surrounding its "creation," and its obvious link to the Easter story. If authentic, the Shroud would have wrapped Jesus's body on Good Friday after his crucifixion, and been cast aside when his resurrection occurred on Easter morning. These are the details that are remembered for fervent believers in the Shroud when coming into contact with what they believe to be a graphic representation of Christ's death, and it is not a coincidence that the release of The Real Face of Jesus coincided perfectly in time with the Christian calendar. This documentary came at a time when Christians would have been preparing for Easter, reminding themselves of Christ's Passion and sacrifice, and therefore would have been in a more receptive mindset in which to take the film on its word that the Shroud is authentic.

March 30, 2010 was the first airing of The Real Face of Jesus, five days before Easter Sunday, on April 4. While the History Channel may not have been aware of the proceeding events, it is still extremely intriguing that on May 2, 2010, Pope Benedict, after his pilgrimage to the Shroud during its public viewing held in April and May, said that the Shroud was the "burial cloth that wrapped the remains of a crucified man in full correspondence with what the Gospels tell us of Jesus."²³ Benedict's statement set off a firestorm of Shroud coverage, with major news outlets reporting on his remarks and the Shroud, along with skeptics such as Joe Nickell writing for the Center for Inquiry, once again refuting the Shroud and its evidence.

There is a cyclical nature to Shroud coverage, that, for the sake of time and length, I will not fully address. But it is a complete understatement to describe the way the media addresses

²³ BBC News, *Pope Benedict Views Turin Shroud*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8657098.stm> (May, 2010).

the Shroud during certain times of the year, and why they choose to do so, as interesting. The fact that for the past several years major news stories have emerged during the times surrounding Easter and even Christmas, and how Marshall McLuhan's theories on how media is presented in regards to its reception fit into this discussion, deserves much more of an inquiry than I can do justice here.

As we have seen with Pia's photograph of the Shroud in regards to Sconce's theory that the photograph created the ability for the photograph to engender belief in a certain way, the pro-Shroud website www.shroud.com is one more mediated presentation on the Shroud that deserves exploration. Run by Barrie M. Schwartz, the official photographer for STURP and self-professed Orthodox Jew, the website is a kind of "one-stop-shop" for information on the Shroud.²⁴

Not only can one come into contact with the Shroud through the site, but a believer (or non-believer, if they so wish) could theoretically "own" the Shroud for themselves, with thanks to the site's online store. Schwartz has offered up his photographs of the Shroud for sale to anyone who wants them, and has even made it possible for someone to own a museum-worthy representation of the Shroud. In regards to Schwartz's "backlit DuraTrans transparencies in photoglow frames" that he promotes, he writes "As any of you know who have ever visited one of the many Shroud Centers around the world that display our lifesize, backlit DuraTrans transparencies, these particular images of the Shroud are the most detailed and breathtaking available...they allow the viewer to see dramatically more depth and detail in the image...now my biggest frustration is that the photographs I am including below do not even come close to capturing the effect of seeing one of the actual backlit transparencies with your own eyes!"²⁵ The fact is, is that seeing one of these transparencies may even be better than seeing the real thing

²⁴ Barrie M. Schwartz, *A Message From Your Host*. <http://www.shroud.com/message.htm>.

²⁵ Ibid, *STERA, Inc. Shroud of Turin Website Store*. <http://www.shroud.com/obtain.htm>.

personally. The work that is done to the believer “owning” the Shroud in this way should not be taken lightly, as it has the ability to shape and determine how one understands the Shroud as a message of faith and a divinely created relic.

Also prominently featured on the site is an area where they make it possible for one to “examine” the Shroud of Turin.²⁶ The page features the enhanced “ventral image master photograph” of the Shroud, and allows the viewer to “point and click on any area in the above photo to examine closeups. [sic]”²⁷ When you click the image, you are taken to a separate page that has an enlarged photo of the area you just clicked, as well as the photo’s “negative” image for sake of clarity, as the body of the man is even more difficult to see in the close-up. For example, when you click on the hand and wrist area, you are presented with two images of the area, as well as text that does some of the “examination” for you. In the example of the hands and wrist, the text reads, “Closeup [sic] of the hands of the Shroud image. Note the bloodstains in the *wrist* [italics original] area. Most art depicts the crucifixion with nails through the palms of the hands. However, the weight of a body cannot be supported by the structure of the hands. The nails must be driven through the wrist to support the weight of the body.”²⁸

The idea that one can “examine” the Shroud, without being privy to it in person through the advent of computer and internet technology, is astounding. Again, in Marshall McLuhan’s words, “the living room [or computer room, library, study, office, etc.] has become the voting booth.”²⁹ What is truly astonishing, however, is the website’s ability to create for the viewer the idea that they are actually “examining” the Shroud for themselves, when nothing of the sort is happening. The images the viewer sees are all mediated through the website, which is evident in

²⁶ Ibid, *Examine the Shroud of Turin*. <http://www.shroud.com/examine.htm>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, <http://www.shroud.com/shrhands.htm>.

²⁹ McLuhan, 22.

noticing that the images from one page to another are actually different. And it should go without saying that the idea that someone could examine the Shroud for themselves through a computer, thousands of miles away from Turin, Italy, seems preposterous. However, for someone coming into contact with the Shroud for the first time or with curiosity generated questions, this ability to “examine” it could be fundamental to the belief in the Shroud. For some, it takes seeing things with their own eyes to have faith in mysterious and controversial subjects. This website, by way of allowing viewers to “examine” the Shroud for themselves, attempts to mitigate any Doubting Thomas’s about the veracity of the Shroud that may stumble upon the site.

While we may never fully know, it is an intriguing thought experiment to try to imagine how the Shroud of Turin would be understood today without the media’s involvement. As we can conceive of the Shroud as a medium in and of itself thanks to the theories posited by McLuhan, and certain belief in and about the Shroud as being improbably without the advent of evolving technology thanks to Sconce, it is quite impossible to tease these relationships apart. The Shroud and the media are forever intertwined, and it is quite likely that without the media and their messages about the Shroud, this fascinating relic—along with the belief that the Shroud is the authentic burial cloth of Christ—would not exist as it does today.

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